



THE HUMAN PERSON

7. The Cardinal Virtues

Texts from the

Catechism of the Catholic Church

What is virtue?

“Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Phil 4:8)

A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.

“The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.” (St. Gregory of Nyssa) (1803)

Human virtues

Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good.

The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love. (1804)

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

Four virtues play a pivotal role and accordingly are called "cardinal"; all the others are grouped around them. They are: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. “If anyone loves righteousness, [Wisdom's] labours are virtues; for she teaches temperance and prudence, justice and courage.” (Wis 8:7) These virtues are praised under other names in many passages of Scripture. (1805)

Prudence

Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; “the prudent man looks where he is going” (Prov 14:15) “Keep sane and sober for your prayers” (1 Pt 4:7) Prudence is “right reason in action”, writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle. It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* [the charioteer of the virtues]; it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgement of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgement. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid. (1806)

Justice

Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour. Justice toward God is called the “virtue of religion”. Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good. The just man, often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures, is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbour. “You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour” (Lev 19:15) “Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven” (Col 4:1) (1807)

Fortitude

Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defence of a just cause. “The LORD is my strength and my song” (Ps 118:14) “In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33) (1808)

Temperance

Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honourable. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good, and maintains a healthy discretion: "Do not follow your inclination and strength, walking according to the desires of your heart" (Sir 5:2) Temperance is often praised in the Old Testament: "Do not follow your base desires, but restrain your appetites" (Sir 18:30) In the New Testament it is called "moderation" or "sobriety". We ought "to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (Titus 2:12).

"To live well is nothing other than to love God with all one's heart, with all one's soul and with all one's efforts; from this it comes about that love is kept whole and uncorrupted (through temperance). No misfortune can disturb it (and this is fortitude). It obeys only [God] (and this is justice), and is careful in discerning things, so as not to be surprised by deceit or trickery (and this is prudence)." (St. Augustine) (1809)

The virtues and grace

Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them. (1810)

Human virtues sustained by the grace of God

It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil. (1811)

IN BRIEF

- **Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good. (1833)**
- **The human virtues are stable dispositions of the intellect and the will that govern our acts, order our passions and guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith. They can be grouped around the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. (1834)**
- **Prudence disposes the practical reason to discern, in every circumstance, our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it. (1835)**
- **Justice consists in the firm and constant will to give God and neighbour their due. (1836)**
- **Fortitude ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. (1837)**
- **Temperance moderates the attraction of the pleasures of the senses and provides balance in the use of created goods. (1838)**
- **The moral virtues grow through education, deliberate acts and perseverance in struggle. Divine grace purifies and elevates them. (1839)**